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ABSTRACT

Grant projects sponsored by the California State University during 1980-1982 to improve writing and critical reading across the disciplines are discussed. Seven campus writing projects and two critical reading projects were supported by the Academic Program Improvement Fund. Four of the writing projects used faculty workshops and training materials as primary methods for improving student writing; a fifth used student writing consultants to assist faculty in the program. Another two projects emphasized scientific and technical writing. The two critical reading projects concentrated on developing a minicourse in critical reading with instructional materials for faculty and student use. Several hundred faculty representing almost all disciplines participated in the writing projects, which affected thousands of students. Faculty were encouraged to assign writing more frequently, to experiment with alternatives to the traditional term paper, and were trained to evaluate and respond to papers in ways that would help students become better writers. In addition to outlining objectives and activities of the writing and reading projects, problem areas are identified, as well as implications of the projects. Ways that project information was disseminated to other campuses are also noted. (SW)

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ACADEMIC CHALLENGES

Writing and Critical Reading

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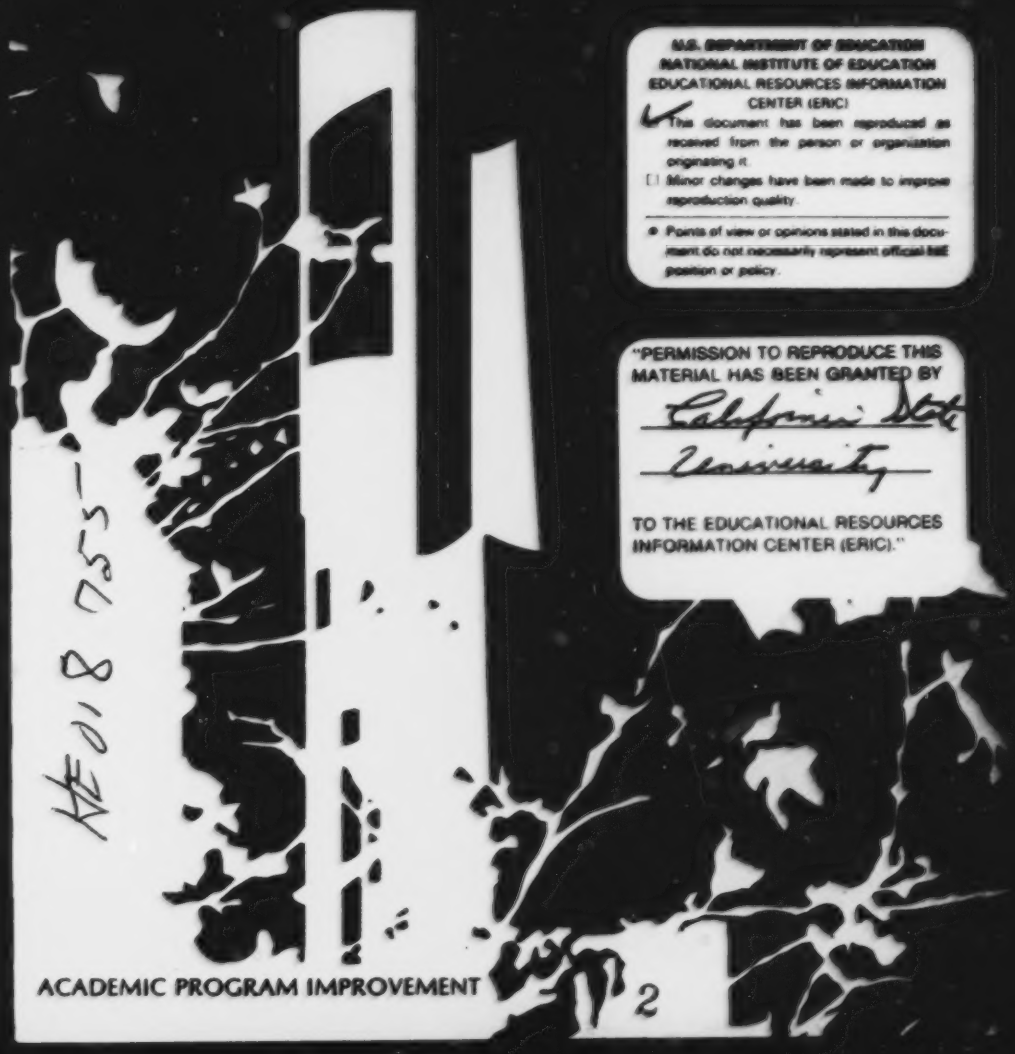

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Table of Contents

	Page
Introduction	1
Background	3
Tools for Learning	5
Writing	7
Critical Reading	12
Dissemination	14
Implications	17

Introduction

Concerns about student "literacy" have dominated the academic agenda as few others in recent decades. The need for greater attention to quantitative, reading, writing and, increasingly, computer skills has served to reshape curricula from K-12 through the bachelor's degree. Yet, within higher education, development of these skills is not being pursued for its own sake (however important that may be), but rather to promote substantive learning in all disciplines.

Given the urgent need for models, programs, and strategies for training faculty to teach writing and critical reading across the disciplines, a series of grant projects was sponsored by the Chancellor's Office of The California State University. From 1980 through 1982, the Office of Academic Program Improvement awarded a total of $226,000 to nine campus projects on interdisciplinary reading and writing. Seven writing projects were funded at $168,000 and two critical reading projects at $58,000.

The projects were part of several innovative initiatives sponsored through the Academic Program Improvement Fund. In addition to the Academic Program Improvement contribution for faculty release time, student assistants, clerical support, and operating expenses, the individual campuses made substantial matching contributions and agreed to continue successful projects once external funding ended.

Four of the writing projects used faculty workshops and training materials as the primary methods for improving student writing; a

fifth used student writing consultants who were assigned to assist faculty in the program. Another two projects emphasized scientific and technical writing. Two others developed a course and related mterials to teach critical reading.

Most of the projects were funded for two academic years, and all were required to produce regular reports and to submit to external evaluations. The mechanics as well as the outcomes of the projects have been disseminated among the campuses in the system. Most of the programs have continued to operate with campus support alone, and several additional campuses have expressed interest in developing similar programs. The campuses funded by Academic Program Improvement included Pomona, Chico, Fullerton, Sacramento, Northridge, Dominguez Hills, Humboldt, San Diego, and San Bernardino.

Several hundred faculty representing almost all academic disciplines participated in the writing projects; thousands of students were directly affected. The faculty were encouraged to assign writing more frequently, to experiment with alternatives to the traditional term paper, and were trained to evaluate and respond to papers in ways that would help their students become better writers. The reading projects concentrated on developing a mini-course in critical reading along with instructional and learning materials for faculty and student use.

Background

Several social, economic, and academic trends have joined to produce the current emphasis on improving comprehension skills and student literacy. In the broadest sense, the movement toward an information society, while demanding high levels of quantitative skills, has produced an equally urgent need for improved communications skills. It is increasingly apparent that computer and technical forms of literacy can never be adequate substitutes for general literacy, and indeed are of little use without it.

The economic system, too, requires simple communication and language as much as complex technology and numbers. The near universal plea of employers is to send them graduates who can read and write well, not merely students who have acquired the necessary technical skills. The needs of management in both the industrial and governmental sectors tend to be similar—namely, workers who are "educated" in the broadest sense.

Writing and critical reading are only partly mechanical exercises; at base, they represent the most fundamental and powerful modes of formal learning. Accordingly, together they form the intellectual foundation for learning in all disciplines—art, business, science, the humanities, behavioral and social sciences,

It is increasingly apparent that computer and technical forms of literacy can never be adequate substitutes for general literacy, and indeed are of little use without it.

and professional fields. Perhaps the most significant development of recent years has been the realization that responsibility for the teaching of writing and critical reading falls evenly on faculty in all academic disciplines.

The academic system, at all levels, is beginning to respond to public pressures for a return to "basics." In most instances, the

response from postsecondary education is reflected in higher admissions and graduation standards. For example, within The California State University, four years of college preparatory English will be required for admission beginning in 1984. Lower division writing placement exams and upper division writing assessments are now mandated throughout the system.

Tools for Learning

Too often, faculty (and especially students) perceive writing as being either a mechanical exercise involving format and style or as a testing device for evaluating student performance. Rarely is it thought of or used as an intellectual or pedagogical device for learning itself.

Writing is not something that should be done *after* learning has occurred, but *during* the learning process. Thus, to the extent that student writing is taught, assigned, and evaluated apart from a history, chemistry, art, or economics class, the most powerful mode of disciplinary learning has been overlooked.

It is therefore critical that faculty and students alike realize that writing is not merely a means of passively conveying information, but that it represents an active and unique mode of learning. Writing is a means both for discovering knowledge and for communicating it, particularly when it is used as an integral part of a course to help students meet substantive course objectives.

In short, when students are given specific writing assignments in any discipline, they tend to learn more and to understand the material better. Writing forces the student to synthesize facts and ideas, develop categories of analysis, discern relationships, interpret and translate academic jargon, apply theoretical

Writing is not something that should be done after learning has occurred, but during the learning process.

knowledge, and form judgments based on logic and evidence. Viewed in this context, writing is less a matter of mastering mechanical skills (spelling, punctuation) than a process of learning and of applying and communicating knowledge, regardless of the discipline.

In a similar vein, reading seems to many like a skill that is so basic that little college-level instruction should be required. In fact, critical reading turns out to be a rather specialized skill which

few students possess and few faculty are prepared to teach. Critical reading focuses on structure as much as content, is more active than passive, and uses comprehension to build speed (rather than the reverse). One writer put it this way:

> Readers must work at good comprehension. It does not come with machines or kits. Readers must pose questions and form hypotheses. A good reader reads to answer questions . . . good reading is the interaction of two minds—the writer's and the reader's. Good teachers do all they can to encourage the most active interaction possible.[1]

In more formal terms, there are three levels of reading comprehension: the literal, the interpretive or inferential, and the applied or critical. Critical reading involves the ability to move easily among the three levels. Yet, "unlike writing problems, which make themselves embarrassingly visible, reading problems often take longer to detect and are harder to diagnose."[2] The ability to read strategically is a prerequisite to genuine understanding, but one which seldom occurs naturally for most students struggling with the jargon and "transactional" prose of an introductory textbook.

Writing is a means both for discovering knowledge and for communicating it.

Writing

Faculty motivations were varied for participating in the writing projects. Some merely felt frustrated by their students' inability to write. Others expressed concern about the professional and career implications of poor writing skills, particularly for science students. Still others viewed the training as an opportunity to become a better teacher generally or improve their own writing. The modest honorarium or assigned time, departmental pressures and politics, and tenure/promotion considerations were also mentioned.

The objectives of the writing projects tended to be quite similar. Using a variety of approaches, participating faculty were trained to or assisted in doing the following:

1. assign more writing in some, if not all, of their classes;
2. assign shorter, more frequent papers starting at the beginning of the term;
3. assign a greater variety of types of writing in each class, and make greater use of writing as a means of disciplinary learning and of career preparation;
4. gain a better understanding of the writing process, and devise assignments that help students with all stages of that process; and
5. feel more confident about evaluating student papers and handling the increased paper load.

With a few exceptions, all of the objectives were satisfied to some extent. Faculty learned how to assign, edit, and evaluate student

Participating faculty also learned how to join the skills of English composition to the substance of their disciplines.

writing and, consequently, were less hesitant about doing so. In this sense, the issues and concerns were very practical with a minimum of theoretical training.

Participating faculty also learned how to join the skills of English composition to the substance of their disciplines. They therefore felt more comfortable about integrating writing into their course and of using it explicitly as a teaching strategy.

The training workshops, materials, guest lecturers, consultations, and other forms of assistance provided by the projects received very favorable evaluations from participating faculty. They felt more confident about teaching writing, rated their skills higher at doing it, and generally assigned more writing in their classes. This was particularly true in disciplines that traditionally had required relatively little writing of students, such as mathematics, accounting, engineering, and the physical sciences.

Some Problem Areas

While the evaluations of the writing projects were generally positive, several caveats and problems should also be noted. First, the evaluations were performed independently on the separate projects; in most cases, the numbers of faculty and students tested were too small to permit drawing any firm conclusions based on statistical tests. Second, survey data suggests that the participating faculty were not representative; i.e., they were a self-selected group of faculty already interested in writing who estimated that other faculty in their departments probably would *not* be interested in such a project. Third, despite the training in assignments, editing, and grading, large percentages of the faculty still reported problems in evaluating student writing.

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Finally, much of the evidence suggested that students were generally unaffected by the projects; few significant differences were found between students in experimental and control classes in terms of their attitudes toward writing, their perceptions about it, or their performance in doing it. Yet, clear evidence on whether the quality of student writing has improved as a result of the projects will be available only after the evaluations have examined several years of impact.

Indeed, despite the very practical nature of the projects to improve writing, there may always be equally practical barriers to achieving it. Faculty fear low student evaluations (for obvious reasons), and there was rather consistent evidence that students resented having to do more writing. Such resistance was strong and pervasive to the point that course dropout rates increased in some instances. Faculty further fear becoming the only writing consultant in their department (analogous to being tabbed "the" academic advisor for a department). Large class sizes provide yet another disincentive to tackle the problem.

But problems of this scope, complexity, and magnitude are never easily resolved. The important point is that the CSU system has developed some successful models for taking the first critical step—faculty participants did increase their knowledge about and improve their skills in the teaching of composition.

Specifically, they reported being better able to design writing assignments and help students strengthen their own writing skills. They also reported more frequent use of such techniques as requiring students to revise their writing and to submit first drafts for comments and grading. They were more likely to present examples of effective student writing in class.

As a result of the workshops, faculty moved from the burden of marking student papers for specific mechancal errors to more global analysis of each student's strengths and problems, particularly in the logic, organization, and structure of the paper. Participants also felt that the sessions increased their confidence in teaching writing to levels comparable to those reported by experienced teachers of composition in the disciplines. Finally, faculty also reported development of more efficient methods for both assigning and grading writing.

An Alternate Approach

While direct faculty training was the most frequent method employed, one of the writing projects engaged trained student consultants to provide the resources and support to faculty interested in writing skills development. Each instructor in the program had a graduate student assigned to work as a writing consultant for five hours a week in one course for the entire semester.

Specifically, the consultant made class presentations on essay exams and paper assignments conducted workshops on the course writing assignments, read exams and commented on the

quality of the writing, offered individual and group tutorials, and referred students, when appropriate, to other campus writing programs or courses.

This approach has several advantages over direct faculty training and some disadvantages. It is clearly inexpensive; a class of 35-45 students can receive an entire semester of writing services and assistance for about $350. The consultants (whether paid or unpaid interns) tend to be very highly motivated.

Perhaps the most important feature of the project was that it mandated that participating faculty give specific writing assignments; that students must meet with consultants; that students complete the writing assignments to receive a grade; that consultants be given class time to teach writing; and that a standardized set of process and evaluative data be collected. Most of the positive outcomes associated with the use of consultants could be traced to enforcement of these mandated features.

On the other hand, this approach does require a strong training program for the student consultants, and there was some evidence of friction between faculty and the consultants assigned to their classes.

Scientific Writing

Two projects were concerned specifically with writing for the life and natural sciences at the upper division level. Although technical and scientific writing is merely a specialized application of general composition, the format and topics are sufficiently distinct to warrant special treatment.

For example, students need to know how research experiments should be reported to professional forums; how to report data graphically and in narrative form; how to structure grant proposals; and how to make findings understandable to both lay and scientific audiences.

A professional science researcher should be able to communicate ideas and data to all levels of management in the government, business, and academic sectors. In fact, one of the general writing projects surveyed several firms which had been major employers of campus graduates in order to gather some empirical information on the types of writing students would be expected to do when hired.

A writing course was developed for upper division science majors to teach the formal conventions of scientific writing. Specific modules were developed for several disciplines around the topics of literature searches; abstracting; use of jargon; presentation of tables, data, and illustrations; referencing; paragraphing; lab reports; and documentation writing (for computer science).

The results of the scientific writing projects varied. An original objective to use peer tutors was abandoned; similarly, interest and participation among science faculty proved to be very limited. And although student attitudes toward the projects were positive, their responses also indicated that they maintained an active fear of writing.

Still, such projects were useful from the standpoint of highlighting the special nature of the problems associated with technical and scientific writing, among faculty and students alike. The projects were also successful in developing videotapes, slides, lecture outlines, and bibliographies for use in scientific writing courses. The utility of such materials is apparent as training in scientific writing becomes more widely diffused in the system.

Critical Reading

It is especially important that entering freshmen (and their instructors) appreciate the close relationship between substantative understanding of course materials and learning strategies, particularly reading skills applied to the basic text. This is true for a couple of reasons.

First, the materials presented in high school lectures often duplicate that which is presented in the text; students seldom have to integrate and interact effectively with both instructional sources (i.e., lecture and text). Most high school learning takes place within the classroom.

Critical reading is essentially a matter of structure and strategy—by learning how and what to read, substantive understanding can be increased.

By contrast, learning in most college courses takes place outside of the class and a heavy emphasis is placed on an independent understanding of assigned text material. Lectures are often used to supplement the text on the assumption that students have already learned the assigned reading.

Secondly, college evaluations of student performance tend to be less frequent and more impersonal than in high school. Large classes and few exams make it more difficult to detect and remedy reading deficiencies at an early stage.

The reading projects had three distinct activities:

1. Instructor training (from the Humanities and Social Sciences) in critical reading strategies for students.
2. Based on an analysis of text structure and key concepts, production of a series of adjunct guides designed to enhance students' selective, critical reading of the text.

3. Development of a 10-week elective mini-course in critical reading to accompany core sections of History 110A (Western Civilization).

The general goal of the reading projects, then, was to train faculty, and ultimately students, in "text-processing skills." Critical reading is essentially a matter of structure and strategy—by learning *how* and *what* to read, substantive understanding can be increased.

Participating students later achieved significantly higher grades than control groups in the same courses; this finding suggests that the acquisition of reading, learning, and study skills has long-term impacts beyond a specific course or discipline.

Evaluations of the reading projects were quite positive. Students were favorably impressed with the mini-course and with the study guide questions, graphic organizers, vocabulary aids, and reading guides provided. They were more self-confident about learning and more interested in their introductory courses than other students.

More important, participating students later achieved significantly higher grades than control groups in the same courses; this finding suggests that the acquisition of reading, learning, and study skills has long-term impacts beyond a specific course or discipline. Moreover, faculty reported that more lively and sophisticated class discussions occurred because students had both read the assignments and comprehended the concepts and ideas more fully.

Dissemination

Two regional workshops were held to disseminate project information to campuses considering initiation of such programs. The workshops were designed for faculty from disciplines other than English who were interested in interdisciplinary reading and writing programs. They provided an opportunity for participants to share approaches to the teaching of reading and writing, explore common problems, and to learn about API funding of such projects. The establishment of such informal networks is essential if faculty are to learn about and act on basic skills training for students.

It is important to note that the impact of dissemination workshops often occurs several years later, not just the following academic year. For example, as a result of the dissemination workshops, three campuses (Bakersfield, Humboldt, San Diego) submitted proposals and were funded the next year. Three additional campuses (Chico, Long Beach, Fullerton) received local support to sponsor faculty training two years later.

All writing projects originally funded by Academic Program Improvement have received campus support to continue some aspect of the program for at least one year, and several campuses have received support for several years (San Diego, Pomona, Sacramento, Northridge) and anticipate continued funding in the future. Although not originally funded by API, San Bernardino has recently completed four years of writing across the disciplines workshops, thereby providing training opportunities for the entire full-time faculty.

In addition to the regional workshops, three booklets have been prepared to encourage the teaching of writing across the disciplines: *Improving Student Writing: A Guidebook for Faculty in All Disciplines; How to Increase Literacy Without Becoming an English Teacher;* and *How to Use Writing to Boost Learning Across the Disciplines.* The first was produced at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona and the last two at California State University, Chico.

Now in its third printing, more than 2,500 copies of the Pomona booklet have been distributed on request to universities and

community colleges throughout the state and nationally. The guidebook has been reviewed nationally in composition journals and lauded as one of the most helpful publications of its kind. The three booklets together offer a comprehensive outline of practical "do's" and "don'ts" for improving the quality of student writing. Copies can be obtained through the Office of Academic Program Improvement in the Chancellor's Office. Writing handbooks for faculty and student use are also being prepared on the Bakersfield and San Bernardino campuses.

Indeed, one of the most encouraging features about the basic skills movement generally, and the contribution which these projects have made and continue to make to it, is the wealth of practical assistance and information available. Faculty training guides, bibliographies, slides, videotapes, course outlines, syllabi, lecture notes, checklists—all of the raw materials for learning how to teach writing and critical reading are readily accessible.

With a minimum investment of time and energy, faculty can draw on these resources and thereby vastly enrich their teaching styles while increasing student enthusiasm for and understanding of course material. Moreover, faculty soon learn that by making better writing assignments, students write better papers, and that time spent evaluating writing assignments is decreased significantly.

In addition to the contributions made through the formal dissemination conferences and published handbooks, the projects were also instrumental in bridging communications gaps among disciplines, especially between English and non-English departments; in providing opportunities for faculty to report on their experiences at national conferences and in the professional literature; and in promoting campus policy development in general education, testing, graduation requirements, and academic standards generally. For example, several campuses have already adopted courses developed by the projects as part of their writing assessment programs.

Apart from generating faculty interest and involvement in writing and critical reading, improving learning outcomes, and producing training materials, such projects are important from an even broader perspective. They serve to stimulate institutional interest generally in the problem of basic skills development, and thereby contribute to the formulation of institutional policies and long-term resource commitments for addressing it. Campus administrations throughout the system are seeking models which

work; many of the elements of successful and efficient approaches have been identified by the projects and can be confidently recommended to campus faculty and administrators.

Implications

What, then, are the general implications about improving interdisciplinary reading and writing that can be learned from these projects? The list could be much longer, but at least five points seem worth noting at this relatively early stage:

1. The teaching of writing and critical reading is a shared responsibility of all faculty in all disciplines. English faculty with composition expertise may have a special obligation to train their colleagues from other disciplines in specific approaches, but the social and academic need for basic skills improvement among students has reached the point that nothing less than a total institutional effort is required.

The teaching of writing and critical reading is a shared responsibility of all faculty in all disciplines.

2. Still, some of the projects were only partially successful in recruiting faculty who might benefit most from such training. Like most such projects, the workshops attracted those already interested in and committed to student reading and writing improvement. Senior, tenured faculty and part-time faculty typically are the most difficult to recruit for such projects. Senior faculty often teach upper division and graduate courses, and part-timers (who teach many of the introductory courses where writing and critical reading are most needed) tend to have schedules which permit only limited involvement in faculty development activities. If these and similar projects are to become more widely diffused among faculty in all disciplines, more explicit incentives may have to be devised in order to recruit faculty with only marginal levels of interest in basic skills development.

3. Improving student writing is as much a psychological problem as an academic one for both faculty and students. Before faculty will be willing to teach and assign student writing, they

must be convinced that it is a respectable and rewarding activity and that it will not take an inordinate amount of time away from other concerns.

If nothing else, the projects provided a sense of "we-feeling" and some practical strategies for reducing such doubts among

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faculty in many disciplines. The mini-courses, peer tutors, and writing assignments were also somewhat successful in promoting greater student self-confidence about their writing. Simply put, fear is a major psychological barrier which faculty and students alike must conquer before any practical results can be achieved through skill training.

4. At the risk of stating the obvious, writing in particular is very hard work for everybody concerned. There is every indication in the project evaluations that faculty dislike teaching and evaluating writing as much as students dislike doing it. Writing is painful, even agonizing, and nothing can change that simple fact of life. Neither faculty nor students in these projects were fooled into thinking that writing could be transformed into something that was easy or fun. However, both groups did move a long way toward recognizing the need to pay the price and a willingness finally to do so. The basic skills movement in education clearly has little of the glitter and appeal of high-tech (for example), but in the long run, it may be even more important to the individual and to society.

Writing and critical reading can and should be sharply distinguished from remedial training.

5. Writing and critical reading can and should be sharply distinguished from remedial training. If faculty associate such skill development with remediation, they will show little

inclination to become involved. Clearly, these projects demonstrated that writing and critical reading are important pedagogical strategies, regardless of discipline. Such training is central to the learning process itself and should be an integral component of virtually every course.

Critical reading and good writing are inseparable links in the learning process. The student rarely learns in the absence of either.

Further, critical reading and good writing are inseparable *links* in the learning process. The student rarely learns in the absence of *either*. Even literal comprehension of reading materials is of limited use if the student lacks the skills to communicate and act on the knowledge that has been acquired. For example, when students are given frequent, short writing assignments, they tend to learn the reading material better and thereby attach a higher value to the writing experience itself. Faculty, in turn, find that such assignments are easier to evaluate and less time-consuming than the traditional end-of-term paper.

In the final analysis, it is in the self-interest of faculty and students alike to become actively involved in such projects. If the ultimate goal of education is to promote student learning, then the lessons of the writing and critical reading projects deserve the close attention of everyone concerned.

References

1. Anne Falke, "What Every Educator Should Know About Reading Research," in *Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*, ed. by Toby Fulwiler and Art Young (Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982), p. 133.

2. Elizabeth Flynn, "Reconciling Readers and Texts," in *ibid.*, p. 139.

For additional or more detailed information on these projects, the reader should contact the Office of Academic Program Improvement, Chancellor's Office, The California State University, 400 Golden Shore, Long Beach, California 90802-4275.

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ACADEMIC PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

The division of Academic Program Improvement assists faculty in developing innovative approaches to improve both teaching and student learning through pilot projects, workshops and conferences. Since 1972, when CSU first received these funds, an estimated 150,000 students and 13,000 faculty have directly participated in one of the projects, workshops or conferences sponsored by the program. An even greater number have benefited indirectly as the effects of instructional improvements are felt by subsequent groups of students and as faculty learn from colleagues who have adopted these changes in curricula and teaching methods.

Funds are provided for faculty assigned time, clerical and student assistance, and supplies and materials not otherwise available through normal campus and departmental support. The overwhelming majority of the projects initially supported through the API office continue with support from the campus institutional budget.

Projects are selected for funding by a competitive review process in which each campus is invited to submit proposals on a variety of important topics. Review committees consist of faculty from throughout the CSU system with final decisions made by an Advisory Committee formed of representatives from faculty, administration, and students. Decisions on proposals are made on merit without reference to campus of origin.

For additional information on the API program, or on any of the projects described in this brochure, the reader should contact:

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